

From Worker's Rights to Ecological Stewardship:
Expanding Scope of Justice of Catholic Social Teaching

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Religion 243: Catholic Popes and Their Social Teaching

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I have adhered to the Honor Code for this assignment. - Satoru Uchida

Modern Catholic Social Teachings (CST), since *Rerum Novarum* was published in 1891, was primarily dominated by commutative justice such as worker's rights. It was 20 years after Europe experienced an attempt of communist revolution in Paris. When Pope John XXIII published *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, the Catholic community observed a clear shift of focus towards social justice, while superpowers threatened human existence. After half a century, Pope Francis published *Laudato Si'*, about "on care for our common home." It is notable that it was published in May 2015, before the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change in the same year. Modern CST aimed to provide guidelines for how to manage ongoing problems in human society justly until *Laudato Si'*. However, for *Laudato Si'*, it is obvious that CST see problems ahead of time. How does the Church make it possible? Looking at CST's development of justice would help to answer the question. In this paper, I will cover what justice is in CST, why the development happened at each time period, and why *Laudato Si'* is another huge step in CST's development of justice by stepping through some sections from *Laudato Si'*.

CST held its tradition of not presenting specific criteria for justice, and I would argue that it is because of the broad vision of CST. Pope Francis, though, talked about the environmental justice of creatures, including non-humans in *Laudato Si'*. His teaching is "individualistic" in that it regards each creature as a participant in our society on Earth. This is a historical step from *Rerum Novarum*. I would consider more specific aspects of justice pre- and post-*Pacem in Terris* with historical contexts until *Laudato Si'*, to construct my thoughts on the change in CST's main theme on justice from commutative to distributive and commutative, answering the questions raised in secular society. Before entering the argument, I would explore what justice is. Throughout modern CST, there are two main subjects of justice: economics and politics. Pope Leo XIII focused on just labor and workers' rights about ten years after Europe experienced the

first attempt at a communist revolution in France. About seventy years later, Pope John XXIII alluded to the idea of just peace while maintaining just war in *Pacem in Terris* right after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Those two dimensions of justice in *Rerum Novarum* and *Pacem in Terris* have different characteristics, which are commutative, distributive, and contributive.

Commutative justice is similar to a contract, which implies it is often found on the basis of various kinds of arguments about what is just. It is not flexible but definitive. On the other hand, social justice, further classified as distributive and contributive justice, sees the need to dictate what is just. Indeed, the Catholic Church has been paying attention to its followers as Jesus did to entire human beings. Still, it does not directly mean it is reflected in CST, an intellectual teaching for all members of the teaching classes in Catholicism. CST was appointed to mention more general, societal aspects rather than individual spheres.

As mentioned briefly, *Rerum Novarum's* primary focus is on a just wage and workers' rights, in terms of a just wage under the rise of communism. Just wage and worker's rights were treated as distributive kinds of justice. Simultaneously, workers' rights are based on commutative justice because its primary focus is the relationship between workers and employers, which is not rigid but needs flexibility. His strong support for the broad idea of human dignity showed the necessity of commutative justice. On the contrary, his relatively specific argument about labor opened the door to express the Church's attitude towards certain problems within human society and the Earth based on distributive and contributive justice.

It was Pope John XXIII who gave intense thought to distributive justice within the context of modern CST. His time was in the midst of the Cold War, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Mater et Magistra* reaffirmed the absoluteness of human dignity within the relationships among human beings and social institutions. Its definition of the common good, "all those social

conditions which favor the full development of human personality,”¹ provides an insight into the updated idea of human dignity. It also adds “justification of all government action is the common good.”² Human dignity is almost absolute thus commutative justice of not to violate its absoluteness must be exercised. Human dignity was also found in a society where increasing numbers of human and social subjects are associated intricately. It invokes the need to protect human dignity through human rights, achieved through distributive and contributive justice, which sees the need in each society and each relationship. Based on the conceptual framework revealed in *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII took the next step to discern fundamental human rights for human dignity in any human society by recognizing the relationship between a single human person and the international human community.³

Pacem in Terris called for “all men of good will,”⁴ which invites people from the entire world to practice distributive and contributive justice among individuals, communities, and political communities. Its discussion of state and individual based on human rights and fundamental freedom complements what CST had established so far, including not only Catholics but also non-Catholic people through religious and political thoughts. Pope John XXIII recognized the universal value of human dignity because humans come from God’s creating hands with dignity.

Since *Rerum Novarum*, CST has continuously worked to protect human dignity from modernization and radical theories that tend to reduce human beings into commodities and deny their dignity. *Rerum Novarum* found the place where any humankind must be protected through distributive and contributive justice, a complexifying human society. Then John XXIII gave a

¹ *Mater et Magistra*, sec 65.

² *Mater et Magistra*, sec 151.

³ *Pacem in Terris*, sec 9.

⁴ *Pacem in Terris*, sec 1.

guideline to eradicate the violation of human dignity by emphasizing human rights and duties. He did not forget to open the door to everyone who wished to be protected because it should be inherent for every human being. He also added a realistic view of international relationships among people and nations given the existence of a weapon that can cause the extinction of humanity. He led a Church to be readily prepared to protect human dignity within human society. Nevertheless, it was not the ultimate end of the modern CST's justice. To fully honor human dignity, every human being needs to be assured the right to life.

Laudato Si' was the first encyclical in various ways. It sheds light on the ecology of literal sense and human spirituality. Pope Francis expanded justice's subject from human beings to all of creation based on the understanding that God's divinity is shared through creation. Massaro called *Laudato Si'* illuminating when we look back "CST on the environment over the past half century." It was a significant step, and in the context of justice, *Laudato Si'* introduced two areas of justice that CST before *Pacem in Terris* had not paid enough attention to - integrated ecology and intergenerational justice. The key prefix is "inter," which implies Pope Francis developed justice along with CST's tradition. Some media treat Pope Francis as an environmentalist and make him a liberal Pope⁵, but in fact, he follows the tradition and elaborates on it in modern society.⁶ His strong support of our welfare and well-being is to protect human dignity. As I touched above, CST has established the milestone to protect human dignity within modern society with the work of Pope John XXIII. Pope Francis expressed his intention to push it forward strongly by providing two fields of justice that relate to human society. *Laudato Si'* strongly dictates where CST is going to seek justice in the coming days.

⁵ The film *The Two Popes* depicted Pope Francis as progressive, liberal person in a secular sense. However, he is not a secular person but one of the most holy, or traditionalistic people on the Earth today in a secular sense.

⁶ Massaro, Thomas. *Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis*, (MD, United States: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 107. Massaro observed Pope Francis has a traditional view towards family, reproduction, abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia.

Laudato Si' stands out in terms of its call for movement. Traditionally, CST has recognized the change in society and then provided the ideal attitude for Catholics, although sometimes it comes with prophetic expectations or bold calls.⁷ However, Laudato Si' goes beyond human society. CST is now leading the global society and is actively involved in the discussion, providing CST's justice as guidance for ecological dialogues.

Laudato Si' steps out of human society from its introduction. Laudato Si' introduced Saint Francis of Assisi as “the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology,” who is “much loved by non-Christians.”⁸ Special focus on vulnerable populations, who are often found on the outer edge of human society and threatened by their right to live, and integral ecology that considers what the human society built upon allows Pope Francis to ask “what it is to be human”⁹ instead of what it is to be Christian. I would focus on integral ecology first, and then move to ecological conversion as a care for the vulnerable.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to providing biblical reasoning that emphasizes the need for an integral ecology from the Church's point of view.¹⁰ Throughout the chapter, Pope Francis cited many Scriptures from the Hebrew Bible and explained the significance of creation.¹¹ Simultaneously, he wrote a great portion of the current scientific understanding of creations, demonstrating that faith and science could co-exist and be able to talk deeply.¹² Nonetheless, he never left Catholics. In section 64, he explains why integral ecology is beneficial to the Christian faith, and its significance for the world. Pope Francis first revealed a duty of Christians to the world, which implies his encouragement for Christians to practice justice.¹³ He then made it clear

⁷ *Pacem in Terris*, sec 137.

⁸ *Laudato Si'*, sec 10.

⁹ *Laudato Si'*, sec 11.

¹⁰ *Laudato Si'*, sec 62.

¹¹ In Chapter 2 of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis cited the Hebrew Bible more than twice compared to citations from the Greek Bible.

¹² *Laudato Si'*, sec 64.

¹³ *Laudato Si'*, sec 63, 64.

that human dignity is obtained through creation and maintained through a relationship with God, our neighbor, and the Earth. Sin disrupts those relationships and lets human beings ignore human dignity and relation to the Earth.¹⁴ The criticism against anthropocentric thoughts is made based on the creation process. God created all creatures with his divinity, thus all creatures reflect God's divine power. All creations honor God by existing. There is no support for anthropocentrism.¹⁵ Since *Rerum Novarum*, CST has already recognized that the unjust treatment of neighborhoods should be eradicated. Pope Francis then included all creatures within the boundary of the neighborhood.¹⁶ It might look like he is not making any distinction between humans and other creatures. However, he is not reducing human dignity but securing it through the integrity of creations. Pope Francis next explains why integral ecology is necessary for eradicating injustice for vulnerable members of society.

Pope Francis argued some problems human society is facing are due to a lack of integral ecology.¹⁷ He praised laborers because they are making the Earth “fruitful” and strengthening the relationship between human beings and the world.¹⁸ This is another reason why CST calls for the protection of employment, which appears to be a form of commutative justice. Massaro assumes the Pope's willingness to spend time with people working at humble places comes from his desire to express solidarity with vulnerable people, who are usually “forgotten” by the globalized economy.¹⁹ His eyes continuously capture the needs of vulnerable people, who are most likely to experience hardship due to globalization and the commodification of humans. He poured so much effort into standing with them and being present for their dignity and solidarity.²⁰ However,

¹⁴ *Laudato Si'*, sec 66.

¹⁵ *Laudato Si'*, sec 68-70.

¹⁶ *Laudato Si'*, sec 90.

¹⁷ *Laudato Si'*, sec 101.

¹⁸ *Laudato Si'*, sec 124-129.

¹⁹ Massaro, 49.

²⁰ Massaro, 51-54.

he also focused on distributive and contributive justice within human life. One notable example of those dimensions of justice is intergenerational ecology.²¹ Pope Francis carefully argued fields in human society from daily life to international economy and politics not only for human beings living in the present time.²² He also sees the need to practice justice for those who are coming after us based on the principle of the common good.²³ It expands CST's justice to 4-dimensional by transcending time. It reflects God's property appeared in Rev. 21:6.²⁴ To make it happen on Earth, he recommended two concrete paths for people. One is ecological conversion, and the other is ecological education. Pope Francis used the term conversion not to let people convert to Catholicism but to convert to an ecological mind by fostering it so that each person has a strong motivation to show respect towards creation and pursue the common good of creation and human society.²⁵ He called special attention to community conversion that respects their solidarity and recognizes the importance and influence of community on the process of ecological conversion.²⁶ Despite his message being designed for every human being, he provided biblical support for the conversion. He asked readers, seemingly for Christians, "Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God.' How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?"²⁷ However, he recognized that ecological conversion needs a great effort to be achieved. It leads him to education. He sees the need for environmental education that aims to provide scientific knowledge and challenge utilitarian mindsets to achieve and sustain ecological

²¹ *Laudato Si'*, sec 159-162.

²² *Laudato Si'*, Ch. 4.

²³ *Laudato Si'*, 156-158.

²⁴ "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6, King James Version).

²⁵ *Laudato Si'*, sec 216.

²⁶ *Laudato Si'*, sec 219.

²⁷ *Laudato Si'*, sec 221.

conversion.²⁸ His attraction towards a theologian who advocated ethical checks upon technological development suggests a possible application of ethics to remain in ecology.²⁹

From a focus on commutative justice for labors in Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* to a distributive and contributive justice expanded to non-Catholics in Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, CST developed its teaching to provide a just standard for various problems in the human society. Pope Francis further broadens this perspective by introducing the concepts of integral ecology and intergenerational justice, expanding the scope of justice to the Earth, including the entire creatures and its future generations. The shift towards distributive and contributive justice made the Catholic Church aware of the needs of people around the world, then the world itself. Its recent focus on “inter” leads to the Church being Catholic, originally meant universal. CST traditionally has provided universal guidance for problems that human society recognizes. *Laudato Si'*, then, showed a new era of CST by articulating multiple problems that human society tends to see independently, marking a great shift from previous CST. Despite *Laudato Si'* showing the growing universality of the Church's teachings, there remain social problems of traditional family structure, reproduction, abortion, and euthanasia. It is unlikely that one day the Church suddenly change her attitude as long as she holds human dignity in the first place because of creation. How will the Church continue to dialogue with groups of people who have ideas that are opposite hers? Will they seek the point of agreement or respect each other's position? Regardless of the Church's attitude and her ideals, human society changes so fast, and sooner or later, the Church will be requested to respond more clearly than ever.

²⁸ *Laudato Si'*, sec 210, 211.

²⁹ Massaro, 83.

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